

MATERIAL CULTURE AND QUALITY OF URBAN LIFE

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Those spaces which can be inferred, for the city, from the rough sketches of the first of the avant-garde have not turned out to be as comfortable as the idyllic images that accompanied the outlines and drawings of their bold progenitors, advocates of more air, more light and more greenery as a counterbalance to the deterioration of the incipient industrial city.

As we face these «graphic ideas» of the future metropolis, we can today contemplate urban spaces contaminated by traffic, diseased by noise, illuminated by signs with messages that become more and more schizophrenic. Unbearable urban discomfort is presented as an answer to those enthusiastic illustrations that displayed progress and reason as irrefutable values in the victory over the musty bourgeois city. The soul of the city that Rilke dreamt of would hand over its spaces to Le Corbusier's well-delimited city machinery, but reason and progress were not to fulfil their Promethean hopes and those formal virtues which flooded the new architecture are now to be found so far removed from their primordial profiles that they wander through the large cities like deceptive meteors of the day and the night.

Ease and «comfort» attempted to make up for the disappointment that accompanied this fraudulent alteration of reason and progress and they were confused with happiness, either as means of gaining it or as ends in themselves for recovering such happiness. Now, towards the end of the century, we note that our cities have grown with such immoderate permissiveness that it is difficult to enjoy the technological conquests of «comfort». Spectacular buildings camouflage the space of the city with illusory adaptations that seem to transform architecture into a supermarket of cosmetic objects in the space that is lived in.

Late imitators and successors, recycled in the art of city building, hasten to pick up the fragments and remains of the injured metropolis and once more the architects present themselves as saviours in the crisis of the end-of-century city. It is not difficult to find urban designers who offer solutions and remedies everywhere for resolving the negative effects brought about by the excesses of an urban science applied in the context of a scientific-technical culture of manufacture of images under the auspices of a postmodern classicism.

But these grammatical interpretations do not appear so clearly in the practice of construction in contemporary space and, above all, in its habitable reality, where the space this type of architecture reproduces moves increasingly and with ever greater eloquence away from the formalization of the place; on their part, the aesthetic relationships of production in which such architecture is developed do not interlace with precision into the social destiny they aim at. In its relationship with the empirical reality within which the space of the present-day city is produced, this figurative architecture can scarcely provide images coherent with the present dynamic of the great metropolis; movement of masses and new means of communication, simultaneity of actions or plurality of co-existence, flexibility and change, movement and emptiness.

A constellation of fragments of industrial death still shapes the city's voids. The space in which urban life is led pays tribute to a technified mythology and the time of man in his urban redoubts seems to have died in the face of technocratic entreaty. They are two events that come linked to the initial break of the avant-garde with the city and to the triple division of the modern «ego» (inner world, nature and society); all this has given rise to changes in the interpretation of the con-

cept of space and in the behaviour which the inhabitants of these places have to adopt.

Three of the most significant events that occurred during the 20th century (the revolution of 1917, the attack on reason in 1933 and the development of a competitive conscience, with the triumph of mercantilism) together with three notions of the modern concept of space (abstraction, surrealism and cubism) explain the incongruent results and the positive features of the modern habitat with precision, although we must admit that the conquests have not been satisfactory and that the places of the city suffer a distortion of their most specific territory.

The city disintegrates in its uses, functions and forms of behaviour; the processes its construction engenders are by their nature polycentric and must attend to different factors, and, in short, should display their ultimate purpose: dwelling. But the facts do not seem to reproduce such an elementary relationship. The contemporary city develops in accordance with poetic and fateful postulates, in alternative defeats and mythical absorption in itself at the service of commercial power and not as a model of analytical introspection about social, cultural, functional and anthropological problems. The most expressive proofs of this are the frustrated experiments in achieving the goal: the new city. The decay of the urban space, as is well known, is a singular and important process in the *Dasein* of cities, but in our days the stigma resulting from such accelerated decrepitude has made the modern citizen a neutral inhabitant in the territories of suffering, perhaps because between pain and nothingness, as César Fuentes argues, suffering is the sign of the unconquered.

We have before us, then, a «new idea of the metropolis», a philosophico-political conception with which to face the evolved city, not with which to postulate certain revisionist models caressed by a late-romantic nostalgia. Already in 1908 August Endell was warning of the fortuitous in form in architecture:

Whoever thinks of architecture always understands, firstly, the constructive elements, the facades, the columns, the ornaments. All these, however, are secondary. What is important is not form, but its opposite, space, the void that extends between the walls, that is limited by them, but whose vitality stands out above them. Whoever is capable of feeling space, its directions and its size, whoever hears music in these movements of emptiness, for him are opened the gates of an almost unknown world.

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We experience the city dominated by planning estimates, bound to the profits of lucre; in the urban medium, time and space acquire an unknown acceleration and dimension, controlled by laws of technocratic reasoning which prescribe the morphology of the city. Anthropological reality appears subject to a permanent interchange of metamorphosis, of families of objects in permanent competition which prevent the inhabitant of the city from discovering his own identity, not only in respect to time but also to his places of residence, making the users of the city confused persons inside their own territory, casual dwellers in transit towards the lost identity, refugees, as M. Proust hazarded, «in a miserable extract of lines and surfaces».

Why not, instead of camouflaging this ideology of the depredation of the city, through the romantic eclipse of the last style of architecture, reveal the «freedom of style» in which the stars of the architectural firmament are confined and the servitude they show in erecting the new fetishes, under the capitalist economy, in the post-industrial city? The market in space in the present-day metropolis, just as in the pre-industrial and industrial city, works in cycles; promoting, first, production; then, products; and then, in our day, the market.

Economic value imposes itself on the real value. In this significant exchange, anthropological reality atrophies when faced with the cultural value of the product and the fetish stands out as a substantiated conscience and pragmatic-cultural value, fashioning a space of fortuitous and irresponsible meanings. Out of this shameless dichotomy arises the battle between those who control construction in the city and those who support and suffer it. The city constructor —politician, planner, architect, designer— is transformed into a cult object: his proposals

and projects are exalted. Price and reverence will be the parameters that sustain dialogue on the existence and the future of a city project.

We have reached the limits. The darkening from the eclipse makes the irrationality of the city rational and, an exile in the metropolis, the average citizen looks for voluptuous architecture and a quiet life although the opposite would be more pleasing. This false relationship with the space of the city is joined to the torment of modern property, which sets a higher value on what is private than on what is social and public, and the silence of those who suffer the city means that promoters can bamboozle them with the construction of examples of «symbolic architecture» that attempt to reduce the misery of an estranged life through memories and unsatisfied desires.

Faced with the discontinuity and piecemeal heterotopy, not only critical but also conceptual and philosophical, with which the city is produced and reproduced, it becomes necessary to reconsider the relationships of time and space involved in it. A series of inconclusive question marks are making themselves apparent at the end of the century in view of the symmetrical despoiling that has been suffered by both the politics and the culture of the city of today.

Why does the construction of man's place of abode constitute a destructive process? Does the development of technology make common cause with the destruction of the idea, structure and space of the city? Is there any sense in continuing to operate in terms of city and with elements of architecture? What postulates are being formed for reconsidering the notions of space and time in the new metropolis? How can we tackle the problem of the exclusion of the *aura* or its reinsertion in the refined multiple aesthetics of the city? Is it still possible to repair the planning excesses of urban science, entrusted with the evolution of the *polis*, or, on the contrary, must the repairing of this failure again be assumed by the old project of the architectural *civitas*? How can the real political destiny of the metropolis of today be reduced to a method that is reasonable and at the same time highly efficient? In what way does the «non-material culture» in which are embedded the foundations of present-day scientific-technological society open up a more appropriate field of creativity than the frequently banal gesticulating offered by certain architects who cling to the power of seduction of the image?

Such questions obviously concern the direction of the thinking itself; and therefore, the project to which the new metropolis leads, the laws that govern its political organization, its diversified structure, the interaction of its pragmatic relationships and the morphology required by its polycentric notion of space must all serve more for the formulation of a political-philosophical way of thinking about the aim and use of the city in the technological-industrial culture of the present day than for conspiracy with the spirit of its constructors, rough producers who invoke, when it suits them, the «spirit of geometry», thereby attempting to hide, from their fringe operations, the unlimited scale of the city, its immoderate proportions, its offensive texture and its already decided «freedom of style».

The underlying style in the «symbolic manierismo» which strives to present the in-existent as something real and which exchanges the space envisaged for the city into a symbolic item of goods is a faithful reflection of the hasty flight from «consecrated architecture»; and the acrobatic exercises of some of its architects at the end of the century in search of the imitative fragment show clearly enough how the plan of the architects for the city has ceased to be a medium of knowledge and has changed into a product of subjective projections, linked to that process of integral marketing which organizes today's society.

As occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century—in architecture, decoration and furniture—yesterday, the good burghers, and today, the undifferentiated mass media consume history, cover their dwellings with forms produced in the past by the bourgeoisie and contaminate with their morphology of «newness» the vicissitudes of daily life, which is, if we are to be blunt, too paltry.

The pathological obsessions with originality, which much architectural discourse on our city spaces falls into, openly proclaims a relinquishment of the sense of environment, which is now replaced by and impassioned worship of the «object as architecture» and which has as its

result the urban show we can see around us, that daily display of visual icons, all in permanent competition with each other. Architecture, like the space it constructs, has become a macrobusiness geared to economic gain. This business, predicts Adorno,

will go on as long as it is profitable and the perfection it has attained will prevent any awareness that it is dead.

Intelligent citizens, those who suffer and support their urban exile, must be prepared, for the moment, to blend their despair with hope for the day when the eclipse has disappeared.